

*** NETANSWERS INTERNET EXTRA ***
*** Number 47: MP3 Music, part 1 ***

My foray into the world of MP3 music began not online, but while staring at the television. For the hundredth time that night, a particular car commercial was being aired. The commercial features an infectious little song based on a tune called 88 Lines About 44 Women. I wanted to hear the song in its entirety, and knew the Internet would be the key.

My musical craving would also mean a chance to play with MP3, a high-quality audio format that has become quite popular in some Internet circles.

During a quick search of DejaNews, I discovered that the tune I longed to hear was sung by a new wave band called The Nails. Finding that information was easy. Finding the song itself was another matter, involving a frustrating foray into the world of pirate web sites that claim to offer free (although not legal) MP3 files. Ultimately I did find the song I was looking for -- legally -- on the official Nails home page. Finally, I needed MP3 player software, which was quite easy to locate.

DejaNews: <http://www.dejanews.com>

Nails home page: <http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/dakaufman/nails.html>

My thirst for '80s new wave was quenched, but I learned mountains about MP3 in the process.

--- First Things First ---

MP3 stands for MPEG 1 layer 3: it's a file format for storing music that can be replayed at near compact disc quality. All it takes to play MP3 music is player software on your computer. You'll also need something to listen to: MP3 song files are available for download from the Internet, or you can create them yourself from CDs that you own.

The music sounds great. To my untrained ears, properly-encoded MP3 files sound just as good as tunes from a compact disc. But you'll need a powerful computer to listen to MP3 tunes. The exact requirements depend on what player you're using, but rest assured you'll need a PowerPC Mac or Pentium-class PC to listen in.

Besides raw computing power, MP3 files require bandwidth and storage space. MP3 files are rather big. They weigh in at about one megabyte per minute of audio: your average pop song will cost 3 or 4 megabytes; Arlo Guthrie's verbose Alice's Restaurant, around 20. Truth be told, MP3 files are amazingly small given what they do, taking up about 10% of the storage space of AIFF or other high-quality sound formats. (Like JPEG is to graphics, MPEG is a "lossy" compression format -- some information is lost in encoding, but not enough that you'd notice.) If you're downloading MP3s from the Net, come armed with a fast connection or be prepared for a long wait. Even if you're encoding the files yourself, you'll need enough disk space to store those puppies.

Detailed information about MP3 and related file formats is available at the MPEG Archive. The site includes a brutally technical FAQ, player downloads for many platforms and other information.

MPEG Archive: <http://www.mpeg1.de/>
United States mirror: <http://usa.mpeg1.de/mpeg1/intro.html>

-.-. Getting a player -.-..

To hear your fabulous MP3 song files, you'll need an MP3 player, software that decodes and plays the audio files.

There are several player choices for Windows users. Among the most popular programs is a shareware tool called Winamp. Winamp is fantastic, offering all manner of doodads including playlists (which let you adjust the order that songs will play), sound equalizers and a customizable interface.

Winamp: <http://www.winamp.com>

There are plenty of other players, too. Check out MP3.com's list of players for Windows or DailyMP3's trove of MP3 software.

DailyMP3: <http://www.dailymp3.com>

MP3.com's Windows software list: <http://www.mp3.com/software/>

There is a veritable cornucopia of MP3 players for Windows, but Mac users have fewer choices. Two popular MP3 players are MacAmp and SoundApp. MacAmp's interface resembles the front panel of a compact disc player, complete with track timer and equalizer blinky lights. There's also a playlist: you can drag your MP3 files onto the playlist and move them around to tweak their order.

SoundApp offers a simpler interface. Although it can play sounds of many types other than MP3, SoundApp doesn't include a playlist feature. A list of other players for the Macintosh can be found at MP3.com's archive of Mac software.

MacAmp: <http://www.macamp.com>

SoundApp: <http://www-cs-students.stanford.edu/~franke/SoundApp/>

MP3.com's Mac software list: <http://www.mp3.com/software/mac/players.html>

In the next issue, I delve deeper into the world of MP3s by downloading sound files from the Internet and even creating them myself from my CD collection. Stay tuned...

==*== SITES MENTIONED IN THIS ISSUE ==*==

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Winamp: <http://www.winamp.com>

DailyMP3: <http://www.dailymp3.com>

MP3.com: <http://www.mp3.com>

MacAmp: <http://www.macamp.com>

SoundApp: <http://www-cs-students.stanford.edu/~franke/SoundApp/>

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The NetAnswers Internet Extra is free to all CompuServe members. It's available in the Internet New Users Forum (GO INETNEW) in file library 11, "NetAnswers".

Got comments or ideas for future issues? We want to hear 'em. Just send a message to savetz@compuserve.com (74774,2725).

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